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Western Political Thought:

Plato:

Political philosophy, branch of philosophy that is concerned, at the most abstract level, with the concepts and arguments involved in political opinion. The meaning of the term political is itself one of the major problems of political philosophy. Broadly, however, one may characterize as political all those practices and institutions that are concerned with government.

The central problem of political philosophy is how to deploy or limit public power so as to maintain the survival and enhance the quality of human life. Like all aspects of human experience, political philosophy is conditioned by environment and by the scope and limitations of mind, and the answers given by successive political philosophers to perennial problems reflect the knowledge and the assumptions of their times. Political philosophy, as distinct from the study of political and administrative organization, is more theoretical and normative than descriptive. It is inevitably related to general philosophy and is itself a subject of cultural anthropology, sociology, and the sociology of knowledge. As a normative discipline it is thus concerned with what ought, on various assumptions, to be and how this purpose can be promoted, rather than with a description of facts—although any realistic political theory is necessarily related to these facts. The political philosopher is thus not concerned so much, for example, with how pressure groups work or how, by various systems of voting, decisions are arrived at as with what the aims of the whole political process should be in the light of a particular philosophy of life.

There is thus a distinction between political philosophy, which reflects the world outlook of successive theorists and which demands an appreciation of their historical settings, and modern political science proper, which, insofar as it can be called a science, is empirical and descriptive. Political philosophy, however, is not merely impractical speculation, though it may give rise to highly impractical myths: it is a vitally important aspect of life, and one that, for good or evil, has had decisive results on political action, for the assumptions on which political life is conducted clearly must influence what actually happens. Political philosophy may thus be viewed as one of the most important intellectual disciplines, for it sets standards of judgment and defines constructive purposes for the use of public power. Such consideration of the purposes for which power should be used is in a sense more urgent today than it was in earlier periods, for humankind has at its disposal the power either to create a world civilization in which modern technology can benefit the human race or to destroy itself in pursuit of political myths. The scope for political philosophy is thus great, the clarification of its purpose and limitations urgent—an aspect, indeed, of civilization's survival.

Despite this unique aspect of the contemporary situation, and although ancient political philosophies were formulated under very different conditions, their study still illuminates vital questions today. Questions concerning the aims of government, the grounds of political obligation, the rights of individuals against the state, the basis of sovereignty, the relation of executive to legislative power, and the nature of political liberty and social justice have been

asked and answered in many ways over the centuries. They are all fundamental to political philosophy and demand answers in terms of modern knowledge and opinion.

This article describes how these questions have been asked and answered by representative and influential political philosophers in the West, from Greco-Roman antiquity through the Middle Ages, early modern times, and the 19th, 20th, and early 21st centuries. During so long a time span the historical context of these formulations has changed profoundly, and an understanding of the political philosophers selected demands some account of their background. Because of limitations of space, only political philosophers of outstanding importance have been at all fully described, although many minor figures also are briefly discussed.

The first elaborate work of European political philosophy is the Republic of Plato, a masterpiece of insight and feeling, superbly expressed in dialogue form and probably meant for recitation. Further development of Plato's ideas is undertaken in his Statesman and Laws, the latter prescribing the ruthless methods whereby they might be imposed. Plato grew up during the great Peloponnesian War between Athens and Sparta and, like many political philosophers, tried to find remedies for prevalent political injustice and decline. Indeed, the Republic is the first of the utopias, though not one of the more attractive, and it is the first classic attempt of a European philosopher to moralize political life.

Books V, VII–VIII, and IX of the Republic are cast as a lively discussion between Socrates, whose wisdom Plato is recounting, and various leisured Athenians. They state the major themes of political philosophy with poetic power. Plato's work has been criticized as static and class-bound, reflecting the moral and aesthetic assumptions of an elite in a slave-owning civilization and bound by the narrow limits of the city-state (polis). The work is indeed a classic example of a philosopher's vivisection of society, imposing by relatively humane means the rule of a high-minded minority.

The Republic is a criticism of current Hellenic politics—often an indictment. It is based upon a metaphysical act of faith, for Plato believes that a world of permanent Forms exists beyond the limitations of human experience and that morality and the good life, which the state should promote, are reflections of these ideal entities (see Platonism). The point is best made in the famous simile of the cave, in which humans are chained with their faces to the wall and their backs to the light, so that they see only the shadows of reality. So constrained, they shrink from what is truly “real” and permanent and need to be forced to face it. This idealistic doctrine, known misleadingly as realism, pervades all Plato's philosophy: its opposite doctrine, nominalism, declares that only particular and observed “named” data are accessible to the mind. On his realist assumption, Plato regards most ordinary life as illusion and the current evils of politics as the result of the human pursuit of brute instinct. It follows that unless philosophers bear kingly rule in cities or those who are now called kings and princes become genuine and adequate philosophers, and political power and philosophy are brought together...there will be no respite from evil for cities.

Only philosopher-statesmen can apprehend permanent and transcendent Forms and turn to “face the brightest blaze of being” outside the cave, and only philosophically minded people of action can be the saviours and helpers of the citizens.

Plato is thus indirectly the pioneer of modern beliefs that only a party organization, inspired by correct and “scientific” doctrines, formulated by the written word and interpreted by authority, can rightly guide the state. His rulers would form an elite, not responsible to the mass of the people. Thus, in spite of his high moral purpose, he has been called an enemy of the open society and the father of totalitarianism. But he is also an anatomist of the evils of unbridled appetite and political corruption and insists on the need to use public power to moral ends.

Having described his utopia, Plato turns to analyze the existing types of government in human terms with great insight. Monarchy is the best but impracticable; in oligarchies the rule of the few and the pursuit of wealth divide societies—the rich become demoralized and the poor envious, and there is no harmony in the state. In democracy, in which the poor get the upper hand, demagogues distribute “a peculiar kind of equality to equals and unequals impartially,” and the old flatter the young, fawning on their juniors to avoid the appearance of being sour or despotic. The leaders plunder the propertied classes and divide the spoils between themselves and the people until confusion and corruption lead to tyranny, an even worse form of government, for the tyrant becomes a wolf instead of a man and “lops off” potential rivals and starts wars to distract the people from their discontent. “Then, by Zeus,” Plato concludes, “the public learns what a monster they have begotten.”

In the Statesman Plato admits that, although there is a correct science of government, like geometry it cannot be realized, and he stresses the need for the rule of law, since no ruler can be trusted with unbridled power. He then examines which of the current forms of government is the least difficult to live with, for the ruler, after all, is an artist who has to work within the limits of his medium. In the Laws, purporting to be a discussion of how best to found a polis in Crete, he presents a detailed program in which a state with some 5,000 citizens is ruled by 37 curators of laws and a council of 360. But the keystone of the arch is a sinister and secret Nocturnal Council to be “the sheet anchor of the state,” established in its “central fortress as guardian.” Poets and musicians will be discouraged and the young subjected to a rigid, austere, and exacting education. The stark consequence of Plato’s political philosophy here becomes apparent. He had, nonetheless, stated, in the dawn of European political thought, the normative principle that the state should aim at promoting the good life and social harmony and that the rule of law, in the absence of the rule of philosopher-kings, is essential to this purpose.

ARISTOTLE:

Aristotle [Credit: A. Dagli Orti/© DeA Picture Library]Aristotle, who was a pupil in the Academy of Plato, remarks that “all the writings of Plato are original: they show ingenuity, novelty of view and a spirit of enquiry. But perfection in everything is perhaps a difficult thing.” Aristotle was a scientist rather than a prophet, and his Politics, written while he was teaching at the Lyceum at Athens, is only part of an encyclopaedic account of nature and society, in which he analyzes society as if he were a doctor and prescribes remedies for its

ills. Political behaviour is here regarded as a branch of biology as well as of ethics; in contrast to Plato, Aristotle was an empirical political philosopher. He criticizes many of Plato's ideas as impracticable, but, like Plato, he admires balance and moderation and aims at a harmonious city under the rule of law. The book is composed of lecture notes and is arranged in a confusing way—a quarry of arguments and definitions of great value but hard to master. The first book, though probably the last written, is a general introduction; Books II, III, and VII–VIII, probably the earliest, deal with the ideal state; and Books IV–VII analyze actual states and politics. The treatise is thus, in modern terms, a mixture of political philosophy and political science (see also Aristotelianism).

Like Plato, Aristotle thinks in terms of the city-state, which he regards as the natural form of civilized life, social and political, and the best medium in which human capacities can be realized. Hence his famous definition of man as a “political animal,” distinguished from the other animals by his gift of speech and power of moral judgment. “Man, when perfected,” he writes,

is the best of animals, but when separated from law and justice he is the worst of all, since armed injustice is the most dangerous, and he is equipped at birth with the arms of intelligence and wit, moral qualities which he may use for the worst ends.

Since all nature is pervaded by purpose and since humans “aim at the good,” the city-state, which is the highest form of human community, aims at the highest good. Like sailors with their separate functions, who yet have a common object in safety in navigation, citizens too have a common aim—in modern terms survival, security, and the enhancement of the quality of life. In the context of the city-state, this high quality of life can be realized only by a minority, and Aristotle, like Plato, excludes those who are not full citizens or who are slaves; indeed, he says that some men are “slaves by nature” and deserve their status. Plato and Aristotle aim at an aristocratic and exacting way of life, reflecting, in more sophisticated forms, the ideas of the warrior aristocracies depicted by Homer.

Having stated that the aim of the city-state is to promote the good life, Aristotle insists that it can be achieved only under the rule of law.

The rule of law is preferable to that of a single citizen; if it be the better course to have individuals ruling, they should be made law guardians or ministers of the laws.

The rule of law is better than that even of the best men, for he who bids law rule may be deemed to bid God and reason alone rule, but he who bids men rule adds the element of the beast; for desire is a wild beast, and passion perverts the minds of rulers, even if they are the best of men.

This doctrine, which distinguishes between lawful government and tyranny, survived the Middle Ages and, by subjecting the ruler to law, became the theoretical sanction of modern constitutional government.

Aristotle also vindicates the rule of custom and justifies the obligations accepted by members of society: the solitary man, he writes, “is either a beast or a God.” This outlook at once reflects the respect for custom and solidarity that has promoted survival in primitive tribal societies, even at the price of sacrificing individuals, and gives a theoretical justification for the acceptance of political obligation.

Like Plato, Aristotle analyzes the different kinds of city-states. While states are bound, like animals, to be different, he considers a balanced “mixed” constitution the best—it reflects the ideal of justice (*dikē*) and fair dealing, which gives every individual his due in a conservative social order in which citizens of the middle condition preponderate. And he attacks oligarchy, democracy, and tyranny. Under democracy, he argues, demagogues attain power by bribing the electorate and waste accumulated wealth. But it is tyranny that Aristotle most detests; the arbitrary power of an individual above the law who is responsible to no-one and who governs all alike with a view to his own advantage and not of his subjects, and therefore against their will. No free man can endure such a government.

The *Politics* contains not only a firm statement of these principles but also a penetrating analysis of how city-states are governed, as well as of the causes of revolutions, in which “inferiors revolt in order that they may be equal, and equals that they may be superior.” The treatise concludes with an elaborate plan for educating the citizens to attain the “mean,” the “possible,” and the “becoming.” The first implies a balanced development of body and mind, ability and imagination; the second, the recognition of the limits of mind and the range and limitations of talent; the third, an outcome of the other two, is the style and self-assurance that come from the resulting self-control and confidence.

While, therefore, Aristotle accepts a conservative and hierarchical social order, he states firmly that public power should aim at promoting the good life and that only through the rule of law and justice can the good life be attained. These principles were novel in the context of his time, when the great extra-European civilizations were ruled, justly or unjustly, by the arbitrary power of semidivine rulers and when other peoples, though respecting tribal custom and the authority of tribal elders, were increasingly organized under war leaders for depredation.

CICERO AND THE STOICS:

Both Plato and Aristotle had thought in terms of the city-state. But Aristotle's pupil Alexander the Great swamped the cities of old Greece and brought them into a vast empire that included Egypt, Persia, and the Levant. Although city-states remained the locus of the civilization of antiquity, they became part of an imperial power that broke up into kingdoms under Alexander's successors. This imperial power was reasserted on an even greater scale by Rome, whose empire at its greatest extent reached from central Scotland to the Euphrates and from Spain to eastern Anatolia. Civilization itself became identified with empire, and the development of eastern and western Europe was conditioned by it.

Since the city-state was no longer self-sufficient, universal philosophies developed that gave people something to live by in a wider world. Of these philosophies, Stoicism and Epicureanism were the most influential. The former inspired a rather grim self-sufficiency and sense of duty, as exemplified by the writings of the Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius; the latter, a prudent withdrawal from the world of affairs.

The setting for political philosophy thus became much wider, relating individuals to universal empire—thought of, as in China, as coterminous with civilization itself. Its inspiration remained Hellenic, but derivative Roman philosophers reinterpreted it, and Roman legists enclosed the old concepts of political justice in a carapace of legal definitions, capable of surviving their civilization's decline.

Cicero lived during the 1st century bce, a time of political confusion in which the old institutions of the republic were breaking down before military dictators. His *De republica* and *De legibus* (Laws) are both dialogues and reflect the Classical sense of purpose: "to make human life better by our thought and effort." Cicero defined the republic as an association held together by law; he further asserted, as Plato had maintained with his doctrine of Forms, that government was sanctioned by a universal natural law that reflected the cosmic order. Cicero expresses the pre-Christian Stoic attempt to moralize public power, apparent in the exacting sense of public responsibility shown by the emperors Hadrian and Marcus Aurelius in the 2nd century ce.

ST. AUGUSTINE:

When Christianity became the predominant creed of the empire under Constantine (converted 312) and the sole official religion under Theodosius (379–395), political philosophy changed profoundly. St. Augustine's *City of God* (413–426/427), written when the empire was under attack by Germanic tribes, sums up and defines a new division between church and state and a conflict between "matter" and "spirit" resulting from original sin and the Fall of Man from the Garden of Eden.

St. Augustine, whose *Confessiones* (397) is a record of a new sort of introspection, combined a Classical and Hebraic dualism. From the Stoics and Virgil he inherited an austere sense of duty, from Plato and the Neoplatonists a contempt for the illusions of appetite, and from the Pauline and patristic interpretation of Christianity a sense of the conflict between Light and Darkness that reflects Zoroastrian and Manichaean doctrines

emanating from Iran. In this context worldly interests and government itself are dwarfed by the importance of attaining salvation and of escaping from an astrologically determined fate and from the demons who embody the darkness. Life becomes illuminated for the elect minority by the prospect of eternal salvation or, for those without grace, shrivels under the glare of eternal fires.

St. Augustine regarded salvation as predestinate and the cosmic process as designed to “gather” an elect to fill the places of the fallen angels and so “preserve and perhaps augment the number of the heavenly inhabitants.” The role of government and indeed of society itself becomes subordinated to a “secular arm,” part of an earthly city, as opposed to the “City of God.” The function of government is to keep order in a world intrinsically evil.

Since Christianity had long played the main role in defense of the veneer of a precarious urban civilization in antiquity, this claim is not surprising. Constantine was a soldier putting to rights a breakdown in government, which nevertheless would continue in the West until the abdication of the last Western emperor in 476, though in the East the empire would carry on with great wealth and power, centred on the new capital of Constantinople (see Byzantine Empire).

St. Augustine thus no longer assumed, as did Plato and Aristotle, that a harmonious and self-sufficient good life could be achieved within a properly organized city-state; he projected his political philosophy into a cosmic and lurid drama working out to a predestinate end. The normal interests and amenities of life became insignificant or disgusting, and the Christian church alone exercised a spiritual authority that could sanction government. This outlook, reinforced by other patristic literature, would long dominate medieval thought, for with the decline of civilization in the West the church became more completely the repository of learning and of the remnants of the old civilized life.

Machiavelli:

In the thought of the Italian political philosopher Niccolò Machiavelli may be seen a complete secularization of political philosophy. Machiavelli was an experienced diplomat and administrator, and, since he stated flatly how the power struggle was conducted in Renaissance Italy, he won a shocking reputation. He was not, however, without idealism about the old Roman republic, and he admired the independent spirit of the German and Swiss cities. This idealism made him all the more disgusted with Italian politics, of which he makes a disillusioned and objective analysis. Writing in retirement after political disgrace, Machiavelli states firmly that,

since this is to be asserted in general of men, that they are ungrateful, fickle, false, cowards, covetous, and as long as you succeed they are yours entirely: they will offer you their blood, property, life, and children...when the need is far distant; but when it approaches they turn against you.

And again,

since the desires of men are insatiable, nature prompting them to desire all things and fortune permitting them to enjoy but few, there results a constant discontent in their minds, and a loathing of what they possess.

This view of human nature, already expressed by Plato and St. Augustine, is here unredeemed by Plato's doctrine of Forms or by St. Augustine's dogma of salvation through grace. Machiavelli accepts the facts and advises the ruler to act accordingly. The prince, he states, must combine the strength of the lion with the cunning of the fox: he must always be vigilant, ruthless, and prompt, striking down or neutralizing his adversaries without warning. And when he does an injury, it must be total. For "men ought to be either well treated or crushed, because they can avenge themselves of lighter injuries, of more serious ones they cannot." Moreover, "irresolute princes who follow a neutral path are generally ruined." He advises that it is best to come down at the right moment on the winning side and that conquered cities ought to be either governed directly by the tyrant himself residing there or destroyed. Furthermore, princes, unlike private men, need not keep faith: since politics reflects the law of the jungle, the state is a law unto itself, and normal moral rules do not apply to it.

Machiavelli had stated with unblinking realism how, in fact, tyrants behave, and, far from criticizing their conduct or distinguishing between the just prince who rules by law and the tyrant whose laws are in his own breast, he considers that the successful ruler has to be beyond morality, since the safety and expansion of the state are the supreme objective. In this myopic view, the cosmic visions of Aquinas and Dante are disregarded, and politics becomes a fight for survival. Within his terms of reference, Machiavelli made a convincing case, although as an experienced diplomat he might have realized that dependability in fact pays and that systematic deceit, treachery, and violence usually bring about their own nemesis.

Hobbes:

The 17th-century English philosopher Thomas Hobbes, who spent his life as a tutor and companion to great noblemen, was a writer of genius with a greater power of phrase than any other English political philosopher. He was not, as he is sometimes misrepresented, a prophet of "bourgeois" individualism, advocating free competition in a capitalist free market. On the contrary, he was writing in a preindustrial, if increasingly commercial, society and did not much admire wealth as such but rather "honours." He was socially conservative and eager to give a new philosophical sanction to a hierarchical, if businesslike, commonwealth in which family authority was most important.

Philosophically, Hobbes was influenced by nominalist scholastic philosophy, which had discarded Thomist metaphysics and had accepted strict limitations on the powers of mind. He therefore based his conclusions on the rudimentary mathematical physics and psychology of his day and aimed at practical objectives—order and stability. He believed that the fundamental physical law of life was motion and that the predominant human impulses were fear and, among those above the poverty level, pride and vanity. Men, Hobbes argued,

are strictly conditioned and limited by these laws, and he tried to create a science of politics that would reflect them. "The skill of making, and maintaining Common-wealths," therefore, consisteth in certain Rules, as doth Arithmetique and Geometry; not (as Tennis play) on Practise onely: which Rules, neither poor men have the leisure, nor men that have had the leisure, have hitherto had the curiosity, or the method to find out.

Hobbes ignores the Classical and Thomist concepts of a transcendent law of nature, itself reflecting divine law, and of a "Great Chain of Being" whereby the universe is held harmoniously together. Following the practical method of investigation advocated by the French philosopher René Descartes, Hobbes states plainly that power creates law, not law power. For law is law only if it can be enforced, and the price of security is one supreme sovereign public power. For, without it, such is the competitive nature of humanity, that once more than subsistence has been achieved, people are actuated by vanity and ambition, and there is a war of all against all. The true law of nature is self-preservation, he argues, which can be achieved only if the citizens make a compact among themselves to transfer their individual power to the "leviathan" (ruler), who alone can preserve them in security. Such a commonwealth has no intrinsic supernatural or moral sanction: it derives its original authority from the people and can command loyalty only so long as it succeeds in keeping the peace. He thus uses both the old concepts of natural law and contract, often invoked to justify resistance to authority, as a sanction for it.

Hobbes, like Machiavelli, starts from an assumption of basic human folly, competitiveness, and depravity and contradicts Aristotle's assumption that man is by nature a "political animal." On the contrary, he is naturally antisocial, and, even when men meet for business and profit, only "a certain market-fellowship" is engendered. All society is only for gain or glory, and the only true equality between men is their power to kill each other. Hobbes sees and desires no other equality. Indeed, he specifically discouraged "men of low degree from a saucy behaviour towards their betters."

The Leviathan (1651) horrified most of his contemporaries; Hobbes was accused of atheism and of "maligning the Human Nature." But, if his remedies were tactically impractical, in political philosophy he had gone very deep by providing the sovereign nation-state with a pragmatic justification and directing it to utilitarian ends.

Locke:

It was John Locke, politically the most influential English philosopher, who further developed this doctrine. His Two Treatises of Government (1690) were written to justify the Glorious Revolution of 1688–89, and his Letter Concerning Toleration (1689) was written with a plain and easy urbanity, in contrast to the baroque eloquence of Hobbes. Locke was a scholar, physician, and man of affairs, well-experienced in politics and business. As a philosopher he accepted strict limitations on the faculties of the mind, and his political philosophy is moderate and sensible, aimed at a balance of power between the executive, the judiciary, and the legislature, though with a bias toward the last (see separation of powers; checks and balances).

His first Treatise was devoted to confuting the royalist doctrine of the divine right of kings by descent from Adam, an argument then taken very seriously and reflecting the idea of government as an aspect of the divinely ordained Great Chain of Being. If this order were broken, chaos would ensue. The argument was part of the contemporary conflict of the Ancients and the Moderns.

Locke tried to provide an answer by defining a limited purpose for political power, which purpose he considered to be “a right of making laws with penalties of death, and consequently all less penalties, for the regulating and preserving of property, and of employing the force of the community in execution of such laws, and in the defense of the commonwealth from foreign injury, and all this only for the public good.” The authority of government derives from a contract between the rulers and the people, and the contract binds both parties. It is thus a limited power, proceeding according to established laws and “directed to no other end but the peace, safety, and public good of the people.”

Whatever its form, government, to be legitimate, must govern by “declared and reasoned laws,” and, since every man has a “property” in his own person and has “mixed his labour” with what he owns, government has no right to take it from him without his consent. It was the threat of attack on the laws, property, and the Protestant religion that had roused resistance to the Roman Catholic monarch James II. Locke is expressing the concerns and interests of the landed and moneyed men by whose consent James’s successor, William III, came to the throne, and his commonwealth is strictly conservative, limiting the franchise and the preponderant power to the propertied classes (and to men, of course). Locke was thus no democrat in the modern sense and was much concerned to make the poor work harder. Like Hooker, he assumes a conservative social hierarchy with a relatively weak executive power and defends the propertied classes both against a ruler by divine right and against radicals. In advocating toleration in religion, he was more liberal: freedom of conscience, like property, he argued, is a natural right of all men. Within the possibilities of the time, Locke thus advocated a constitutional mixed government, limited by parliamentary control of the armed forces and of supply. Designed mainly to protect the rights of property, it was deprived of the right of arbitrary taxation or imprisonment without trial and was in theory responsible to all the people through the politically conscious minority who were thought to represent them.

Although Locke was socially conservative, his writings are very important in the rise of liberalism in political philosophy. He vindicates the responsibility of government to the governed, the rule of law through impartial judges, and the toleration of religious and speculative opinion. He is an enemy of the totalitarian state, drawing on medieval arguments and deploying them in practical, modern terms.

This sort of vision was developed and elegantly popularized by the cosmopolitan French savant Montesquieu, whose work *De l'esprit des loix* (1748; *The Spirit of Laws*) won immense influence. It was an ambitious treatise on human institutions and a pioneer work of anthropology and sociology. Believing in an ordered universe—for “how could blind fate have produced intelligent beings?”—Montesquieu examined the varieties of natural law,

varying customs, laws, and civilizations in different environments. He made the pedestrian good sense of Locke seem provincial, though he admired him and the British constitution. Unfortunately, he overemphasized the separation of executive, judicial, and legislative powers, considerable in Locke's day but by his own time tending to be concentrated in the sovereignty of Parliament. This doctrine much influenced the founders of the United States and the early French Revolutionaries.

ROUSSEAU:

Rousseau, Jean-Jacques [Credit: Courtesy of the Musée d'Art et d'Histoire, Geneva; photograph, Jean Arlaud] The revolutionary romanticism of the Swiss French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau may be interpreted in part as a reaction to the analytic rationalism of the Enlightenment. He was trying to escape the aridity of a purely empirical and utilitarian outlook and attempting to create a substitute for revealed religion. Rousseau's *Émile* (1762) and *Du contrat social* (1762; *The Social Contract*) proved revolutionary documents, and his posthumous *Considérations sur le gouvernement de Pologne* (1782; *Considerations on the Government of Poland*) contains desultory but often valuable reflections on specific problems.

There had been radical political slogans coined in medieval peasant revolts and in the 17th century, as in the debates following the revolt of radical officers in the Cromwellian army (1647), but the inspiration of these movements had been religion. Now Rousseau proclaimed a secular egalitarianism and a romantic cult of the common man. His famous declaration "Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains" called into question the traditional social hierarchy: hitherto, political philosophers had thought in terms of elites, but now the mass of the people had found a champion and were becoming politically conscious.

Rousseau was a romantic, given to weeping under the willows on Lake Geneva, and his political works are hypnotically readable, flaming protests by one who found the hard rationality of the 18th century too exacting. But man is not, as Rousseau claims, born free. Man is born into society, which imposes restraints on him. Casting about to reconcile his artificial antithesis between man's purported natural state of freedom and his condition in society, Rousseau utilizes the old theories of contract and transforms them into the concept of the "general will." This general will, a moral will that aims at the common good and in which all participate directly, reconciles the individual and the community by representing the will of the community as deriving from the will of moral individuals, so to obey the laws of such a community is in a sense to follow one's own will, assuming that one is a moral individual.

Ideas similar to that of the general will became accepted as a basis for both the social-democratic welfare state and totalitarian dictatorships. And, since the idea was misapplied from small village or civic communities to great sovereign nation-states, Rousseau was also the prophet of a nationalism that he never advocated. Rousseau himself wanted a federal Europe. He never wrote the proposed sequel to the *The Social Contract*, in which he meant to deal with international politics, but he declared that existing governments lived in a state of nature, that their obsession with conquest was imbecilic, and that "if we could realize a

European republic for one day, it would be enough to make it last for ever.” But, with a flash of realism, he thinks the project impracticable, because of human folly.

That the concept of general will was vague only increased its adaptability and prestige: it would both make constitutionalism more liberal and dynamic and give demagogues and dictators the excuse for “forcing people to be free” (that is, forcing people to follow the general will, as interpreted by the ruling forces). Rousseau could inspire liberals, such as the 19th-century English philosopher T.H. Green, to a creative view of a state helping people to make the best of their potential through a variety of free institutions. It could also play into the hands of demagogues claiming to represent the general will and bent on molding society according to their own abstractions.

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